DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 296 858 RC 016 683

AUTHOR Jess, James D.
TITLE Rural Education: A Different Kind of Politics. A Local School Perspective.
PUB DATE 16 Mar 88
NOTE 16p.; Paper presented at Pioneer Hi-Bred International, Inc., "Rural Education: The Search for Solutions," (Des Moines, IA, March 16, 1988).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Community Support; *Decentralization; Dropout Prevention; Elementary Secondary Education; Individual Instruction; *Politics of Education; *Rural Schools; Rural Urban Differences; School Community Relationship; School District Size; *Small Schools
IDENTIFIERS Iowa; Maryland (Cecil County)

ABSTRACT

The rural work ethic, a strong sense of community togetherness, and the absence of class distinction help rural schools avoid the politics that often stand in the way of education in larger urban and suburban schools. Factors contributing to successful schools include clear goals, good principals who know how to motivate faculty, faculty who know how to motivate students, a safe and orderly environment, and community involvement. Success can be measured by high scores on standardized tests; a high proportion of students who go on to postsecondary education; high attendance rates; low dropout rates; and a high percentage of students involved in extra-curricular activities, student awards, and school awards. Strengths of rural schools include small classes, individual attention, more leadership opportunities, many occasions to develop individual talents, and strong community support. Rural disadvantages include faculty teaching beyond their major fields, lack of equipment, lack of cultural assets, shortage of funds, distance from colleges and universities, bias against rural areas in the larger society, failure to understand the differences between rural and urban schools, and the lack of a rural education network. Rural education compares favorably with a larger, highly centralized school system in which teachers and administrators were highly unionized, and where school boards were appointed and had no funding authority. Educational success depends upon local input, acceptance, and support, according to the paper. (SKW)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED296858

RURAL EDUCATION: A DIFFERENT KIND OF POLITICS

A Local School Perspective

Pioneer Hi-Bred International, Inc.
Rural Education: The Search For Solutions
Des Moines, Iowa
March 16, 1988

James D. Jess, Superintendent

Alden Community School, Alden, IA

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

JAMES D. JESS

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

RC 016683

RURAL EDUCATION: A DIFFERENT KIND OF POLITICS

A Local School Perspective

Pioneer Hi-Bred International, Inc.
Rural Education: The Search For Solutions
Des Moines, Iowa
March 16, 1988

James D. Jess, Superintendent

Alden Community School, Alden, IA

I have been asked to speak to you this evening from a practioner's point of view. Nearly all of my experience as a teacher and administrator has been spent in rural schools of Iowa. The State of Iowa is home to 436 local school districts. Seventy-five percent of whom enroll fewer than 1,000 students in grades Kindergarten through 12 and they are responsible for educating one-third of the state's school age population. These 335 rural school districts serve one or more small towns whose combined population in most instances is less than 2,500 people plus the residents who live on farms in the open country-side that surround them. The percentage of rural schools in Iowa is similiar to the rest of the nation where we find nearly two-thirds of our nation's 15,600 school systems are educating one-third of our country's elementary and secondary school youngsters that live in rural America. The United States Department of Education defines rural education as those schools who serve communities with fewer than 2,500 populations and extended cities with less than 1,000 people per square mile.

I understand that the average community size for those of you that are attending this conference is about 2,500. Therefore, much

of what I have to say should sound familiar to you. As I looked over the participants list and the states that you represent, I know that we have a great deal in common. During my tenure as president of the National Rural Education Association, I had the opportunity to visit many of your states. While on those visits, the rural education issues and concerns expressed by your rural educators were similiar to the issues and concerns that confronted those of us living in rural Iowa.

It took me some time to gather my thoughts on what I would discuss in regard to my topic: RURAL EDUCATION: A DIFFERENT KIND OF POLITICS. I struggled with the topic because I never viewed local politics as something that stood in the way of getting things done in the rural schools I have been associated with. Two institutions play a major roll in the lives of people who live in rural America -- their churches and their schools. These two institutions provide the glue that holds the community together. Those with different religious views join together in their separate congregations, but the school brings them together for the common cause of educating their young people.

Former Secretary of Education Terril Bell in a speech he delivered in Washington D.C. at the 1984 National Rural Education Conference stated, "Rural America represents much of what is good in our society and contains many of the traditional American values that will keep our society strong in future years." He went on to cite that sociologist have observed that a state's character, culture, economy, values, beliefs and social attitudes have been traditionally shaped by its small towns. He concluded his remarks by saying, "the cause of rural education that is so effectively advocated by rural constituents is almost sacred."

Small town America has indeed played a major role in shaping our country's past and its present and it will continue to help shape its future. The traditional values that small town Americans hold dear are as important to them today as they were yesterday. Last March microchip pioneer, Robert Noyce who is now vice chairman of Intel Corporation spoke to a college audience in his home town, Grinnell, Iowa. He told how small town life nutures entrepreneurship. "Small towns" he said "foster a strong work ethic. There is also a strong sense of participation and community togetherness, and the absence of class distinctions means people from small towns treat everyone as equals." Noyce said that rural America is a "hotbed of capitalism." "Farmers are risk takers. They invest with the hope of a return. The family farm is indeed a capitalistic enterprise."

Its that small town work ethic combined with a strong sense of participation and community togetherness and the absence of class distinction where everyone is treated equally that helps void rural schools from the local politics that often stands in the way of getting things done in our nation's larger urban and suburban schools. That is not to say that special interests do not exist in rural communities which inturn reflect on the emphasis that is placed on educational programs and activities in rural schools. My experience is that a rural school generally reflects the goals and values of the community it serves. If a particular sport or cultural activity is strongly supported in a rural community that activity will be emphasized in the school's extra-curricular program. If preparing young people for college or for a particular line of work are priorities for citizens in a rural community, the school's scope of

educational course offerings will reflect the citizen's wishes. Boards of Education, administrators and faculties that I have had the pleasure of working with over the years have tried to be responsive to student interests and parent concerns in their effort to provide educational programs that meet standards set both by the state and the local community.

Let's briefly review what we have learned about successful schools through the work done by the National Elementary and Secondary School Recognition Program. A program sponsored by the U. S. Department of Education to seek out and recognize schools that are doing an outstanding job of educating all young people in their school community. Schools that have been selected for recognition appear to share *nine* common attributes:

1. The school has clear goals and core values. There exists a sense of shared purposes among faculty, students, parents and community. Although the school's written statement of goals are similar to those found in any school, what is different is that these statements are taken seriously and are translated into actions in day-to-day activities.

2. The principal provides the necessary vision and energy in creating and maintaining conditions of success. Likewise, the principal is the major force in initiating improvements and in encouraging, supporting, and integrating faculty initiatives.

3. There is a combination of control and discretion in the school. The principal exercises control by monitoring the school's operation; by insisting on careful articulation and management of the school curriculum across subjects and grades; and by being thoughtful and careful in the supervision of teaching staff. At

the same time, teachers have a great deal of autonomy in doing their work. Such a culture of collegiality creates a sense of collective responsibility and accomplishment as well as a strong sense of efficacy.

4. The school has good people and a good environment. The school holds on to talented staff who have a sense of belonging to an institution whose goals and values they not only share, but also have power to influence. Equally important, the school has a work environment that is safe, secure and comfortable. Order and discipline is monitored and well maintained by all staff and respected by all students.

5. The school rewards teacher accomplishments. Individual teachers are singled out both formally and informally by both the administration and by their peers. Successful schools show teachers and other staff their appreciaiton in a variety of ways.

6. The school motivates students. High student motivation is a consequence of their positive relationship with adults. Teachers and students often meet informally before and after school for one-on-one instruction or participation in an extra-curricular activity. Open and caring relationships with teachers showing students that not only does the school care about academic achievement, but it also cares about them as human beings. This, in turn, leads to a positive school environment where students and faculty strive to achieve shared goals.

7. The unusually successful school has a strong conviction that all students can be motivated to learn. Accompanying this is a willingness among school staff to accept responsibility for enhancing learning opportunities for their students. Higher

expectations coupled with strong reward systems, both formal and informal, are used as a means to recognize student acheivement and good behavior and to encourage even higher levels of performance among all students.

8. Successful schools stand apart from other schools in their creative responses to problems. Rather than viewing problems as constraints, they view them as opportunities. The school takes a proactive attitude toward solving problems.

9. The final attribute that makes a successful school stand out among ordinary schools is its high degree of parent and community involvement. The staff works to involve parents and community members in school activities rather than visa versa. These individuals contribute human resources in carrying out the day-to-day school activities, promoting the school, and helping support additional funds. Staff not only invite the parents and community into their classrooms and corridors, they also take the school into the community by providing opportunities and encouraging students to participate in a variety of community activities for curricular and extra-curricular experiences.

Although measuring school success is difficult, there are indicators of success that can be used. Highly successful schools that share common attributes generally share the following common indicators of success:

1. Their students score well on standardized tests or minimum competency tests when compared to other schools with similar student populations.

2. Successful secondary schools experience a high rate of success in terms of the numbers of students who go on to post-secondary education, find jobs or enlist in the military.

3. Daily student and teacher attendance rates are high and the rates of student suspensions and expulsions are low.

4. Student drop-out rates are low.

5. The schools have a high percentage of student participation in extra-curricular activities.

6. Students receive awards for academic and extra-curricular activity achievement. High school students are awarded numerous scholarships at the time of graduation.

7. The schools receive awards and recognitions for outstanding leadership, teaching and programs.

Now that we have looked at the common attributes and indicators of success for schools that have received national recognition as outstanding elementary and secondary schools, let's look at the obvious strengths of our rural schools.

* The classes are small;
* Individual attention is the order of the day;
* Students can and do participate more in extra-curricular activities;
* Students have many opportunities to lead and to develop individual talents;
* The school environment is safe and orderly;
* Community involvement and support are strong;
* Students, teachers, and parents care about each other;
* Informal structures enhance flexibility, creativity, and shared-decision making;
* Schools are central to their communities' educational, recreational, and cultural activities; and
* When the rural school thrives, so does the community around it.

Although rural schools have many inherent strengths, they also encounter some well-known problems resulting from their small size, isolation and sparse population.

* Faculty must teach many different subjects, sometimes outside their major fields;
* Schools often lack up-to-date labs, libraries, and specialized equipment;
* They often lack the cultural assets found in urban areas (museums, libraries, theatres, access to concerts, etc.)
* They usually suffer from inadequate financial resources;
* Professional salaries are freqently not competitive with those of their urban and suburban counterparts;
* Heavy workloads, limited resources, low salaries, lack of professional recognition, and low esteem for rural educators make it difficult for rural schools to attract and retain outstanding teachers and administrators; and
* Distances from colleges and universities and between neighboring schools often limit professional interaction and development among rural educators.

A less obvious, but even greater disadvantage derives from academics' and policymakers' unintentional neglect of rural schools. Although rural education is a hugh enterprise which comprises two-thirds of our nation's local school systems and serves nearly one-third of our nation's elementary and secondary youngsters, we know relatively little about how these schools work in their various settings and how we can respond to their special needs. The less obvious, but more serious problems facing rural education are:

* A historical anti-rural bias in an urban-oriented society;

* Professors' and policymakers' neglect of rural education;
* Lack of appreciation and understanding of the differences between rural and urban schools;
* Insufficient initiative and support to carry out an agenda for rural education research and development; and
* The lack of a sophisticated, well-structured rural education network.

These less obvious, but more serious problems have caused heavy external political pressure to be applied to rural schools. The push for educational excellence coupled with the rural economic depression in the Midwest has struck rural schools a double blow. State legislatures are demanding tougher school standards; mandating new programs; requiring more courses; lengthening the school day; calling for a longer school year; and making professional certification requirements more rigorous. Policymakers have also lengthened pre-service programs, raised in-service requirements for recertification, and shortened certification periods.

Interstate competition is also causing legislatures to set higher minimum starting salaries for new teachers and to raise the average pay for seasoned instructors, tying State contributions to performance pay plans and extended employment contracts. Intra-district competition for scarce new dollars is drawing battle lines between large and small, urban and rural educators.

The political remedy is to call for greater school efficiency; minimum school enrollment size; maximum pupil/teacher ratios; a narrow disparity in statewide per pupil expenditures; containment of administrative overhead, operation expenses, and maintenance costs; reduction in use of facilities; and statewide plans for restructuring

school districts. Moreover, legislators use the results of accountability studies and school efficiency reports to justify their requirement that school districts operate more efficiently.

They consider large schools located in densely populated metropolitan cities more efficient than those in sparsely populated rural areas. Politicans also rebuke rural schools for their quality of education--based on number of units offered; the teachers' education and degree of experience; the results of college extrance exams; and the number of graduates who qualify as merit scholars. Affluent suburban schools generally outshine the rural schools in all four of these areas.

No one, however publicizes the remarkable achievements of rural schools. In Iowa for example, the small rural schools have a higher percentage of students who take college entrance exams and enroll in post-secondary schools than any other kind of school. These rural schools also have the lowest dropout rates among all the different size school categories, as well as the highest percentage of students involved in extra-curricular activities. In addition, Iowa's small rural schools have shown the greatest support for the passage of optional tax referendums to supplement their local budgets. Politicians who are advocating further consolidation of Iowa's rural schools are also ignoring popular public opinion. In a recent public opinion poll conducted by the Des Moines Register 61% of those polled felt that the quality of teaching was better in smaller school districts compared to 20% who felt it was better in larger districts.

For 14 years, from July 1973 to June 1987 I had the opportunity to serve as suerintendent in one of Iowa's smallest school districts whose patrons are determined to maintain their small scale community

based operation because they value the educational experience that it provides their children. Once a district with an enrollment of 550 students, CAL now serves 250 students in K-12 and another 50 children in a two year pre-kindergarten program for three and four year olds. The district is a shining example of community support for excellence in education. It's students have an inspiring record of academic success. The school's standardized student achievement scores are among the highest in the State and Nation. Student and teacher daily attendance at CAL averages 96%. The school has not had a drop out in more than 10 years and nearly 85 percent of the CAL graduates pursue higher education with unusual success. Parents and grandparents enthusiastically volunteer their services in the school. The school opens its facilities to community residents and the voters in the district have passed every local option tax referendum available to them with majority votes in excess of 80 percent.

Boston University's Institute for Responsive Education studied the school system in 1979 and concluded that two fundamental beliefs blend to form the ground work for high quality education at CAL. One is the belief in the personal approach. CAL refuses to stereotype the student, parent, teacher or administrator, preferring instead to treat people as individuals. The other belief is in decentralization, the empowering of individuals with respect and value, so that they are more than "heard"; they become shaping forces in the creation of the school. Such open channels of communication help people realize that they are all involved in the continuing process of making CAL Community School a good place for learning, for teaching, for growing--whether one is a student,

parent, teacher or administrator.

The Governor of Iowa recognized CAL as having one of the State's 15 exemplary partnerships in education in 1985. CAL's Elementary School was one of Iowa's eight nominees for the U. S. Dept. of Education's 1985-86 Elementary School Recognition Program and one of its elementary teachers represented Iowa's teachers at the 1986 National Teacher's Forum in Washington, D. C. The CAL High School, with a 9th-12 grade enrollment of 84, was selected as one of the nation's 271 outstanding public and private secondary schools in the 1986-87 Secondary School Recognition Program. The site visitor who observed the school to substantiate information in the school's application told school authorities, "CAL has every thing in place that most educators strive a lifetime to achieve in their schools." Last December, Secretary of Education William Bennett cited CAL High School as one of seven high schools in the nation with excellent curricula.

In June 1987, I left Iowa to take over the superintendency in Cecil County, Maryland, a school system 50 times the size of CAL. By conventional standards of input measurements, the Cecil County Public School System is something that many Iowa urban legislators see as the answer to restructuring Iowa's system of inefficient rural schools. The countrywide school system had six comprehensive high schools, four middle schools, sixteen elementary schools and a vocational education center. It's teaching staff was well educated and tenured. Teaching salaries were well above the national average and the cost per pupil exceeded that of most rural schools in Iowa. The State of Maryland has a highly centralized state system of education where students are required to pass minimum competency

tests in reading, writing, math and citizenship before they receive their stateissued diploma. The Cecil County Central Office also runs a highly centralized school system where decisions flow from the top down. Needless to say, the teachers as well as the administrators are strongly unionized. School Board members were appointed by the Governor and the Board of Education has no funding authority. The school system's budget is approvedand finalized by a separate Board of County Commissioners. After a few weeks on the scene, I learned what politics in education was all about. I realized Cecil County was providing me a sharp and unfavorable contrast to the Midwest way of education I was used to where my experience had been that children come first and teachers, parents and administrators work in partnership to see that each child succeeds. Instead of finding myself being an educational leader who was hired to bring about change in a district that was tired of being reactionary, I found that I was spending most of my time signing letters expelling students, prepar ing responses to employee grievances, and trying to convince the members of my management team that principals should be capable of running their buildings. I sympathized with parents who called and said that they did not feel comfortable going into their child's school and talking to the teachers. I got tired of hearing that all schools and programs had to be the same because we were a county school system when the student populations within the county varied so much from one attendance center to another.

By December I called it quits and asked to be released from my four year appointment and $60,000 a year job. Much to my delight the Alden Community School Board was in need of a superintendent at mid-year. After listening to the Board's commitment for excellence in their rural school district, I decided to accept their offer to

become their new superintendent. Last Tuesday, the voters in the Alden District showed their support for the school by passing their first local tax referendum since 1983. I am finding that the people in the Alden Community are as anxious to keep their school viable as are the people in the CAL District. It is exciting for me to see a different kind of politics at work again. The kind of politics that draws a local community together rather than split it apart.

In closing, I want to say that the Nation's pursuit of excellence in education is admirable and the State's request for efficiency is commendable. What is neither admirable nor commendable, however, is the sacrifice being forced upon rural education as a result of the two forces working against each other. Rural schools are unique. They operate under different conditions, and hold a special place in their communities. They are the life blood of rural America and hold promise of its future development.

Rural education requires special attention from the academics and the policymakers who affect its welfare. The nation requires a strong educational system that serves the needs and desires of both urban and rural communities. The Cecil Counties, the CAL Communities and the Aldens. What is good for the delivery of programs and services to one is not necessarily appropriate for the other. Excellence in education can be packaged in various ways in myriad settings, but it always needs local input, support and acceptance.